Chapter 10

Planning a
Focused Inquiry

In addition to analyses of the state required indicators, other project-identified outcomes, and project objectives, local evaluations include a focused inquiry for program improvement. Chapter 10 covers developing a plan to design and conduct the evaluation focused inquiry. Specifically, it presents considerations for:

- choosing the evaluation focus;
- developing project objectives and evaluation questions;
- choosing methods and instruments; and
- developing a timeline.

Earlier chapters examined aspects of participant outcomes and program practices that can guide and inform the evaluation. In practice, a focused inquiry generally addresses one or two aspects at a deeper level, such as:

- exploring reasons for lower or higher than expected indicator results;
- looking more deeply at groups of participants to understand larger patterns;
- finding out more about subgroup services and outcomes;
- gathering multiple perspectives on outcomes;
- supplementing outcomes with more information from schools; and
- gathering longitudinal information.

By focused inquiry we refer to the development of and data collection for key evaluation questions designed for program improvement. The evaluator works with project staff to identify a focus for the inquiry, then takes the lead in shaping the evaluation plan—refining evaluation questions, identifying appropriate methods and instruments, developing a timeline—and carrying out the plan.

In crafting the evaluation plan, the local evaluator draws on his or her evaluation expertise (e.g., informing staff about the trade-offs and consequences of choosing different methods) and facilitation skills (e.g., engaging staff in discussions and decisions about their evaluation). In most instances, the evaluator will have some background knowledge or familiarity with the project. For background on Even Start, the evaluator should consult the Even Start non-regulatory guidance, the Even Start statute, the project's previous evaluation report, and any state Even Start guidance.

## **Choosing the Evaluation Focus**

Sources for identifying the focus include findings from a previous evaluation report (e.g., the average number of home visits is less than intended), changes in participation outcome data (e.g., results were lower than expected and there is no obvious reason why), current issues raised by staff (e.g., levels of reading skills differ by site), and concerns raised by collaborators or stakeholders (e.g., adult participants attend irregularly).

A project's objectives can be another source of focus. Each project has its own objectives, as stated in its approved application or RFP. These objectives are generally based on the Even Start program purposes (Section 1231 [20 U.S.C. 6381] Statement of Purpose) and on the 15 program elements as stated in the federal law (Section 1235 [20 U.S.C. 6381d] Program Elements). A review of progress in meeting the objectives can suggest an area of concentration for the focused inquiry, for example, *Are families staying in long enough to achieve learning outcomes?* 

The local evaluator usually leads discussions with project staff to identify an area or areas for the focused inquiry. This discussion can take place at a staff meeting, a special meeting for focusing on evaluation (e.g., a yearly retreat), or with the project's advisory committee. Broad questions such as, What questions do you have about the program? can be too vague for staff to answer. More specific questions, such as, What learning activities worked well for you this past year? What didn't? are more useful. They may generate discussion about specific areas of concern.

The local evaluator should involve all project partners, if possible, in deciding the evaluation focus and manner of collecting data. The evaluator also may want to involve collaborating agencies in data collection. The more he or she can engage project staff, partnership members, and collaborators in decisions about the evaluation focus and the evaluation process itself, the more likely the findings will be understood and used.

Evaluations of new projects tend to focus on operations and ways to get the project started, such as *strategies for building collaborations*. As the project grows, other concerns arise, such as questions about the effects of program strategies on participant outcomes. Regardless of a program's development stage, the evaluator must keep the focus on improving services to maximize children's and adults' achievements.

If there are several ideas for the evaluation focus, the evaluator and project staff need to decide what is most important and useful to address in the coming year. The evaluator can lead this discussion to choose which questions are essential and which are less so.

**Selecting an evaluation focus based on past performance indicator data.** Based on past data, project staff may choose to pilot a solution or collect more information about possible solutions. One will be the focus of the evaluation. Examples of choices include:

■ Performance indicator data showed that only 14% of parents took the TABE post-test. Further examination showed that the hours offered were insufficient to meet requirements. As a result, project staff used new strategies to increase the number of available hours. The next evaluation can focus on how the new initiatives are working.

# Example: Engaging Collaborators

As her first step as an evaluator, Marilyn Muñoz forms an Evaluation Advisory Committee. It includes the project leader, partner agencies and organizations, primary collaborators, staff representatives, and other key players. At the first meeting she introduces evaluation as a way to learn about the project. She leads the discussion by asking questions such as What works well and what doesn't? What are the project's strengths and weaknesses? Where do we need to go back to the drawing board and reconsider? She uses the responses to determine the subject of the focused inquiry and evaluation questions.

#### Example: First-Year Focus

One evaluator encourages staff to focus the first-year evaluation on collaboration. In addition to child and adult education outcomes, the evaluation addresses getting services running, staff development and training, recruitment, establishing regular communications, etc. Her first-year evaluation also addresses benefits and barriers for collaborators. As a result, collaborators have become more involved with the project during its start-up and have taken an active role in recruiting and serving families.

- Analysis of adult reading achievement showed that adults who do not make progress on the TABE post-test enter Even Start at lower levels than adults who make gains on the TABE. Project staff members try a new strategy: family educators provide adult tutoring or instructional support during home visits to parents who scored low on the TABE pre-test. The next evaluation can focus on the effectiveness of this new strategy.
- Analysis of school age student performance indicators reveals an increase in school attendance but no increase in reading skills, despite the provision of after-school services. Project staff decide to enhance the after-school services, including additional parent-child interactive literacy activity time. The evaluation would concentrate on appropriate activities and their effects on children who are not meeting grade level expectations.

# **Developing Project Objectives and Evaluation Questions**

**Identifying objectives.** Projects may identify further objectives to help meet performance indicator expectations or other education outcomes. These objectives are in addition to those stated in the approved application or RFP, and may or may not dovetail with the focused inquiry. They also may change every year.

Evaluators can help program staff identify or refine clear and reachable objectives. Some objectives may be connected to education outcomes. For example:

- By October 30, approximately 75% of participating families will demonstrate changes in their parenting and use appropriate literacy strategies to help their children make educational progress.
- By the end of the program year all parents will be surveyed about advocating for their children in school, e.g., their knowledge of parents' rights and responsibilities in the school system.
- By spring, a minimum of 50% of participating adults will show progress toward attaining one or more of their adult education goals.

Other objectives may pertain to project operations, such as

- All staff who provide direct services to families will participate in an average of five hours of general and individual professional development per month.
- Where appropriate, family members, family literacy staff, and other agencies will be involved in setting goals.
- At least 60% of families will remain in the Even Start project for at least one year.

Evaluators can help develop other objectives based on findings from previous evaluations such as recommendations, results from performance indicator data, or staff observations. The evaluator and staff will identify how to measure progress toward each objective. In some cases measuring the objectives will be straightforward; in others, the evaluator may have to ask questions to understand what criteria staff members consider important for achieving their objectives. The evaluator also ensures that there is a means for tracking whether or not the objectives have been met.

**Designing evaluation questions for a focused inquiry.** Once an evaluation focus has been determined, the next step is to develop relevant evaluation questions. Evaluation questions generally seek information about the value of intended actions or practices. For example, in response to lower than expected findings for children's reading skills, a project may decide to make strengthening their children's reading skills part of the parent education curriculum.

General evaluation questions include:

- How effective is the new focus? What do parents learn? What do they do differently with their children? How do the new skills affect children's scores on assessments of reading skills? How much do children's reading scores improve?
- Which groups benefit most from the new attention to reading skills? Are parents who are highly engaged in reading to their children more or less likely to apply what they learn?
- Under what conditions is the new program element effective?
- How satisfied are staff, parents, and collaborators with the new program element?

In other cases, project staff may decide to collect more information about ongoing practices. Then the evaluator can develop questions that are specific enough to generate usable information from which to develop strategies to strengthen program practices, such as:

- How does the parenting component affect parents' interaction with their children's school?
- How does the Even Start project affect parent involvement in the school?
- How do oral language development opportunities for Even Start children vary by site?

Good questions produce answers that can inform decisions. One way to check whether a question will yield useful information is to ask, "What will the answer or answers tell us about our project? What are possible answers? What will we do if we know. . . ?" Sometimes one question will be enough, or several questions may be needed.

Another consideration for designing an evaluation question is whether the project administrator and/or staff members can act on an evaluation's findings. Although a finding may suggest a useful action, the timing may not be right, or authority to act may rest outside the project personnel. For example, findings about the effectiveness of an instructional curriculum may be less useful if staff members can't influence curriculum decisions. In such cases, the questions could be refined rather than abandoned: the evaluation could address approaches that augment the current curriculum, for example.

Below are suggestions for developing useful evaluation questions7:

- Phrase questions so that data can be collected to answer a specific question.
- Allow more than one possible answer to the question; that is, do not use yes or no questions.
- Check that project staff are interested in the questions and care about the answers.
- Confirm that project staff can articulate how they would use the data—ensure that questions are relevant to program operations.

#### **Choosing Methods and Instruments**

As the focused inquiry becomes clearer, issues of data collection methods will arise. The evaluator can ask staff members for input on the data collection design and method, e.g., whom to collect data from and what data to collect. Ultimately the local evaluator is responsible for refining the design and identifying the concrete activities. He or she has to make choices about the sample, methods, and instruments.

**Sample.** The evaluator must identify the appropriate sample. Sample choices are usually limited because the projects are small—the population is often so small the evaluator treats it as the universe, or whole population. Therefore, if the evaluator wants to make inferences or generalizations about the project's population, he or she needs to collect data from all participants, a challenging task. If the evaluator gathers observations from a population subset, he or she should ensure that the subset adequately represents the whole population.

**Methods.** The evaluator suggests methods for collecting information. Evaluators are encouraged to use relevant comparisons, e.g., similar participants. The Even Start evaluator is not usually in a position to conduct a randomized experimental evaluation study. However, a stronger evaluation will result if the evaluator chooses an appropriate comparison group. Evaluators may use statistical methods to adjust for initial differences between groups.

Comparisons can be made among different groups of participants (e.g., based on attendance hours, entry level scores), among different settings (e.g., observations of the same participants at the home visit and in the classroom), or at different times (e.g., observations of the same participants, in the same settings, at different times).

Evaluators should consider both quantitative and qualitative methods, since the strengths of one can compensate for the weaknesses of the other. Available data sources, such as content analysis of meeting minutes, family portfolios, teachers' observations, etc., can also inform the evaluation. Evaluators should select the most direct methods that provide reliable information, and consider triangulating data from different sources to enhance the dependability of data from small samples.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> From Patton, M.Q., 1997. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. 3rd edition. CA: Sage Publications.

**Instruments.** Because available instruments are usually not specific enough for the project's needs, evaluators sometimes develop protocols to collect data about the local project. These instruments include measures associated with the project's design and implementation as well as participation. The evaluator may develop several instruments to gather information from multiple perspectives, e.g., staff focus group questions, parent surveys, and child interview guides.

Local evaluators may also choose questions from an existing instrument. However, evaluators who adapt existing instruments are encouraged to balance judgments about reliability and validity with the purpose and intended use of the focused inquiry.

### **Developing a Timeline**

The timeline outlines what evaluation activities need to be carried out, by whom, and when. It differs from the Scope of Work and consultant agreement drawn up with the project administrator (see Chapter 9) in containing all the pieces for the focused inquiry, such as identifying the evaluation questions for the inquiry; how, when, and from whom data will be collected; and the timeline for analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the findings. The evaluation timeline also includes analyzing and reporting data the project routinely collects, including participant outcome data, attendance, and other program data. The evaluation timeline is specific enough that staff members know their responsibilities, and broad enough to allow some adjustments in case problems arise. Problems such as delays in getting data from partners, adverse weather conditions, or unexpected staff turnover may arise.

The local evaluator should review the timeline with project staff before finalizing it. During this discussion the evaluator can explain why certain methods were chosen, what trade-offs were made, and probable consequences of the decisions. This discussion may necessitate changes in the evaluation plan timeline. Staff knowledge may influence data collection, e.g., they may have a better sense of parents' and instructors' schedules, or timelines may need to be adjusted in terms of staff commitment.

Reviewing the timeline with staff members allows them to raise questions and concerns about approaches such as a survey versus individual interviews. Throughout these discussions, the evaluator considers alternatives and provides technical advice about the pros and cons of certain decisions. Finally, the evaluator revises the management plan and submits it to the project leader, who makes final decisions about the timeline.

The following page shows an example of an evaluation plan timeline.

Example:	Evaluation	Plan Timeline
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Evaluation Activities	Responsibilities	Timeline
Establish evaluation focus		Early September
- Meet to discuss evaluation focus	Evaluator, project staff, collaborators	
Develop evaluation questions and suggested design and procedures		End of September
- meet with staff to discuss plan	Evaluator & staff	
- revise plan based on discussion	Evaluator	
Data Collection Activities		October - February
- design and pilot protocols	Evaluator	
- obtain consent forms if needed	Staff	
- administer pre- and post-tests for state required performance indicators	Staff	
- identify and contact focus group participants	Staff & evaluator	
- conduct focus groups with program participants	Evaluator	
- contact teachers for interviews	Staff	
- conduct interviews with teachers	Evaluator	
- determine how education records will be obtained	Staff & school collaborators	
- collect education records	Staff	
- meet regularly to provide updates	Evaluator & staff	
Data Analysis		March – April
- review and verify data	Evaluator	
- obtain performance indicator data from project	Evaluator & staff	May
- analyze performance & program objective data	Evaluator	
Data Reporting		June
- report & discuss preliminary findings	Evaluator & staff	
- draft evaluation report	Evaluator	
- review report	Staff	
- submit final report	Evaluator	